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ABSTRACT

This bulletin describes the Dallas Community College District's (DCCD's) efforts to develop a common learning core curriculum. Introductory material discusses the creation of Committees for Common Learning to decide on standards and requirements for all students who enroll in degree programs at any of the seven district colleges and to design an implementation process to support their recommendations. The next section examines the DCCD's grassroots review process, which is underpinned by the tenets that the structure of the review process must reflect its intent and that the personal impact of the process must be anticipated and addressed. Then, highlights of the Committee's recommendations are outlined, including suggestions for a common learning core consisting of a 9-hour block of courses and additional courses for transfer and occupational students; a curriculum review process; a prerequisite skills guide; and required written work. The following section presents an interview with Ken Alfers, co-chair of the District Common Learning Committee, which addresses the curriculum review process, ongoing concerns, and the future of common learning in the DCCD. Finally, a set of Skills for Living goals is presented, which are geared toward helping students become more competent in developing themselves as individuals, in living with others, in becoming more competent producers and consumers, in living in the community, in developing and applying creative abilities, in living in the future, and in living as a learner. (HB)

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COMMON LEARNING AT DALLAS

CSCC BULLETIN, ISSUE 12, 1984

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JC 840 463

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BULLETIN

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General Education, Skills for Living, Basic Skills, Common Learning - what do they mean? More important, can curriculum be built around these complementary concepts?

The Dallas Community Colleges believe they can. Committees for Common Learning were created in 1981 to decide on standards and requirements for all students who enroll in degree programs at any of the seven colleges in the district and to design an implementation process to support their recommendations. Their deliberations fed into a central district committee and, after several review and revision cycles, yielded a set of recommendations.

The committee defined and redefined the meaning of common learning. It began thinking of common learning as nearly synonymous with general education, in which students, through a process of shared experiences, would come to recognize their shared language, skills, information, and values. The committee determined that definition went beyond and that common learning must include ways in which students come to appreciate the complexity of their world.

As recommendations have been formulated, submitted, reviewed and accepted, and as they now begin to be put in place, the commitment has grown to spend money, and to devote staff time to accomplish this renewal. In effect, the two-year common learning project is just the beginning of the necessary reaffirmation of the general education offerings of the DCCCD. The reaffirmation involves adding goals for common learning, finding new ways of fulfilling those goals, communicating better about those goals in our institution, examining the way we provide instruction and the basic skills which underlie all common learning, and revising graduation requirements to reflect our concept of common learning.

Although we have been about this work for several years already, an intensive development process of perhaps a decade lies ahead as the DCCCD builds a comprehensive, understandable plan to insure the quality of its general education.

Drawing by Sharon Griffith

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BULLETIN

Curriculum Review: The Power of Process

The Common Learning Committee deliberated about revitalizing the curriculum review process. As it became clear that this review would be more than cursory, a number of groups increased their involvement in the process - faculty, vice presidents of instruction, presidents, and district level leadership, including the chancellor.

Two powerful tenets emerged. When building a process that calls for substantive review:

I. The *structure* itself must reflect the intent of the process.

II. The *personal impact* of the process must be anticipated and addressed.

What has evolved is a grassroots review process that will involve large numbers of faculty and administrators. Project teams composed primarily of faculty will do much of the work; department chairs and college curriculum committees will then review, refine and evaluate on the college level; then a district-wide curriculum review committee made up of Vice Presidents of Instruction, assisted in curriculum review by college curriculum committee chairs, will further refine and make final recommendations. All this will be accomplished with facilitation from professionals both within and outside the district.

As the committee worked, the truth of the first tenet became even clearer. No segment of the instructional process in our district could be overlooked without doing damage to the whole intent of the curriculum review. Equally clear was the need to address personal concerns in as many face to face encounters as possible. The committee sensed this and became missionaries, as it were. They found themselves in constant dialogue with colleagues in college-wide meetings, division meetings, discipline meetings – all in an effort to alleviate concerns, to demonstrate a willingness to revise again.

Dallas County Community College District
Common Learning Committee

Ken Alfers, Co-Chair
Mountain View College

Ruth Shaw, Co-Chair
Associate Vice Chancellor of Educational Affairs

Sharon Burton
Brookhaven College

Ed Garcia
Cedar Valley College

Alylene Hexar
Eastfield College

Sue Cross
El Centro College

Sue Jones
North Lake College

Gary Verett
Richland College

Highlights of Common Learning Recommendations

Common Learning Core: A nine-hour block of courses will be required of all degree seeking students. These nine hours are recommended as a core to teach basic skills in writing, speaking, and computation and to encourage development of the conceptual and human skills needed to function effectively. In addition to a writing course and a math course, the third component of this core is to be a new course – Speech Communication 101. This course is intended to develop skills in interpersonal communications, small group communications and public speaking. It will offer substantial opportunity to practice speaking and listening skills. An interdisciplinary project team of speech communication and human development faculty will develop the course.

AAS (Transfer) Students: In addition to the core, AAS students will be required to take the following 34-36 hours:

English 102	3 hours
Sophomore Literature	3 hours
Laboratory Science	6-8 hours
Physical Education	1 hour
Humanities	3 hours
Behavioral Science	3 hours
Business	3 hours
Social Science	12 hours
Electives #	16-18 hours

Under these recommendations, the number of hours necessary to complete the AAS Degree will increase from 60 to 61, with an increase in general education hours from 35 to 43-45.

AAAS (Occupational) Students: In addition to the core requirements, AAAS students will be required to take six additional hours from the following four clusters:

Laboratory Science: Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Physical Science, Physics

Behavioral/Social Science: Anthropology, Government, History, Human Development, Psychology, Sociology

Business: Business, Accounting, Management, Computer Science, Economics

Humanities/Fine Arts: Art, Foreign Language, Humanities, Literature, Music, Philosophy, Theatre

Curriculum Review Process: The process is designed to assure that Common Learning Goals are being addressed throughout the curriculum. It calls for the Vice Presidents of Instruction Council to meet jointly with faculty chairs of the college curriculum committees to establish priorities for curriculum review and to oversee the process.

The most intensive work of the curriculum review process will be completed by project teams composed primarily of faculty. The teams will take the lead in these substantive tasks: Identification of prerequisite skills for the course(s) being reviewed; identification of generic, connecting objectives for common learning; review of course organization; identification of a core of exit skills; development of a plan for evaluating course or program effectiveness; recommendation of related learning resources, student development activities, and staff development activities.

Curriculum Review Guide: This document will describe the elements of curriculum review and will provide models and samples of various paper processes to facilitate various facets of curriculum review.

Prerequisite Skills Guide: All project teams that work on specific curriculum review projects will be asked to identify basic skills required for the courses under study. This information will be gathered through structured interviews and questionnaires with common prerequisite skills established for a program within the District. Each college will individualize the guide by adding college specific elements, the particular learning support systems developed at that location – including prerequisite skills for their unique college programs.

Required Written Work: Written work is to be a significant part of student requirements in all common learning courses. That is, in all courses that are part of the 15-hour AAAS core or which are part of general AAS degree requirements, practice in writing is to be included. The intent is to make a strong statement to students and to the community about the importance we place on writing skills.

"The Key Word Is Review"

An Interview with Ken Alfers
Co-Chair of the District Common Learning Committee
and Member of the History Faculty at Mountain View College

Q. How would you summarize the District Common Learning Committee's thinking about the curriculum review process?

A. For me, the key word is review. The Committee thought of itself as devising a process to review where we are and where we really want to be. Then our task was to devise the tools and build the skills to make the journey between those two points.

Basically, we were after changes that will match the content of learning with the goals of learning. We identified both tools and skills that would be needed to make the right connections. The tools came to be such things as the Curriculum Review Guide, the Prerequisite Skill Guide, and various resource manuals. The skills we kept talking about were collaborative skills—skills that would enable us to come together both within disciplines and between disciplines to make useful connections for common learning.

In the final analysis, our recommendations have much more to say about how content is taught than what content is taught. So you see, the thread of process has woven its way through all of our deliberation.

Q. Are there ongoing concerns you would point to now that recommendations have been finalized?

A. One concern is that we will somehow let down and not continue to involve faculty to the extent we have during the first two years of the evolution of common learning. I believe that is a key. During the next stage Vice Presidents of Instruction will assume more of a leadership role than during the first phase, but it is clear to me that VPI's must intensify the level of dialogue they have with faculty about the curriculum issues we have identified. That dialogue will be so important.

A second concern I have is that we may underestimate the need to learn how to control the dynamics of such a change process. During these first stages, we have been in a consciousness-raising exercise. But as we have worked, our professionals have begun to perceive curriculum as a powerful element of our work. When it finally became clear that the review process we were devising would be substantive, we created a new political reality. I think it likely that such changes will increase and that feelings about curriculum issues may be volatile, at least for a time.

The positive side of that is that at the Chancellor's initiative, there is a new emphasis on trust in the District. I think the timing for such an emphasis is exactly right for the further development of common learning. So, although I am aware of the pitfalls, I am deeply optimistic about our ability to deal with the kinds of dialogue our curriculum review may well produce.

A final concern I have is that long time faculty members and administrators will be unable to put behind them a "here we go again" feeling, a cynicism that takes the position that nothing much will happen anyway. I don't think that will be the case this time, but it is important to dispel those doubts in as many ways as we can or we lose important human resources.

Q. Why do we resist the kind of change proposed in the curriculum review process?

A. There are a whole list of reasons: It is easier to do what is familiar.

This kind of analysis makes us call into review, perhaps even question, our own professionalism and what that means.

Although we try not to be, we tend to be isolationists. We read our own discipline material and get very good and very comfortable in our content niche. That's a difficult pattern to change.

Change is difficult. In this case, our general education curriculum has been in place for so long and the review process has been perfunctory; as other educators have said, it's like moving a graveyard—there is something sacred about it as it is, although most of us know a review is long overdue. I guess what I'm suggesting is that so many of the feelings we experience are not rational.

Finally, there is a ripple effect about these changes that is threatening. Let me explain, if I can. As we begin to look at prerequisite skill needs for our courses, I think it likely that more and more we will move to a system where students will not be admitted to classes where they cannot handle basic skill requirements for that course. That may affect enrollment patterns in my history classes for a short time. But if we do our work well, by the third semester, we should be back in form. I believe we can deal with two semesters of transition. I also believe that the institution and our students will be stronger for the work we've done. But the ripple effect is there and does require personal adjustment.

Q. Has your work on common learning and the curriculum review process changed you as a teacher?

A. It has increased my awareness of the connections that need to be made while I am teaching. Now I make more connections for my students. I find myself using more

"Key Word"

(continued)

examples from science and even math in lectures.

I have asked for the help of a writing expert on our faculty. He has helped me structure my writing assignments differently. That has been good for my students and for me. I am better able to spot language deficiencies in my students. More important, I have a clearer understanding now of how skill deficiencies contribute to student failure. I am even clearer on the logic behind the need for writing assignments across the curriculum. We must build these skills in our students. I have become quite a missionary about this.

Q. Were there any surprises for you as you worked on common learning?

A. Each of our seven colleges put together their own plans for common learning. The district committee then selected from among various components and distilled those plans into one district-wide set of recommendations. I remember that at first I was genuinely surprised at the variety among these seven plans. In trying to revitalize general education, no two colleges took exactly the same approach. Partly that reinforced for me the enormity of the question with which we were dealing. The question our colleges were asking themselves reminded me of the childhood game, "How do you look at an elephant?"

Just to point out one obvious difference: Some colleges concentrated their energy on looking at degree requirements. Other colleges spent more time looking at curriculum review. We had the task of meshing these perspectives. It was fascinating work.

Q. Do you have any predictions about the future of common learning in the District?

A. I guess more than prediction, I would want to make one more recommendation: That those involved in the future stages of common learning and curriculum review need to learn from the process as it has already evolved. We have learned a great deal. I hope we can transfer that experience in effective ways.

I guess, to say that another way, I would want to state my belief that the *review process* we have been about *works*. You *can* get people together – from different disciplines, involving both faculty and administrators – and keep the focus forward looking, keep the focus on the improvement of student learning.

The Backdrop: Skills for Living

"Skills for Living," a set of goals previously established in the district, was the guiding document for the Common Learning Committee. These goals directed each college to provide opportunity for students to move toward:

I. *Living with Yourself:* Will become more competent in developing themselves as individuals.

II. *Living with Others:* Will become more proficient in establishing and maintaining satisfying relationships with others.

III. *Living with Environments:* Will understand the relationship between individuals and their environments and make responsible decisions about the use of natural, human, technological and spatial resources.

IV. *Living as a Producer:* Will become more competent producers.

V. *Living as a Consumer:* To become more competent as consumers.

VI. *Living in the Community:* To become more competent in using their skills and initiative to serve their local, national, and world communities and improve their quality of life.

VII. *Living Creatively:* To become more proficient in the assessment, development, and application of their creative abilities.

VIII. *Living in the Future:* To become more proficient in anticipating and accommodating change and to become more competent in examining possible alternatives for the future.

IX. *Living as a Learner:* To develop learning skills (reading, writing, speech communication, and computation) through assessment, advisement, and instruction.

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